

November 5, 2018

The Genealogy of Alien Contract Labor Law: Hidetaka Hirota

Time: 12:00pm - 1:30pm

Location: Faculty Lounge

Professor Hirota's current book project, "The Business of the Nation: Foreign Contract Labor and the Rise of American Immigration Control," examines the transnational business of importing Asian, Canadian, European, and Mexican contract laborers to the United States and the evolution of federal alien contract labor law designed to restrict this form of immigration over the course of the long nineteenth century. Since the early nineteenth century, Americans opposed the immigration of poor foreign workers who would degrade the dignity of labor and lower American wage standards. The opposition to immigrant labor became especially strong in the case of contract workers. In 1885, American workers' antipathy to "alien contract labor" resulted in the passage of the federal Foran Act to ban the landing of foreign contract workers and deport those already in the United States back to their countries of origin. This project examines how hostility toward contract labor migration influenced American immigration law and how the alien contract labor law in turn affected immigrant workers.

The paper traces the intellectual and legal genealogy of alien contract labor law by surveying the antebellum roots of opposition to imported labor in the United States. While labor radicalism in the late nineteenth century played a crucial role in the introduction of the Foran Act, the federal law was built upon earlier discourses on servile labor and the economic impact on Americans of immigration of certain kinds. In particular, the paper identifies the following four issues in antebellum America as the ideological and legal origins of the alien contract labor law: 1) Free Soilism, 2) "pauper labor" discourse, 3) assisted emigration, and 4) coolieism. The analysis in this paper is not intended to provide new evidence or revise historiography on these topics. Instead, the paper aims to demonstrate how the antebellum debates over the four issues collectively, if not exclusively, laid the foundations for the federal alien contract labor law, placing it in the broader framework of immigration politics beyond the labor conflict in the late nineteenth century.

Hidetaka Hirota is a non-tenure-track Assistant Professor in the Institute for Advanced Study at Waseda University in Japan. He received his Ph.D. in History from Boston College, where his dissertation won the university's best humanities dissertation prize. He previously held research and teaching positions at Columbia University and the City University of New York-City College. He is the author of *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (OUP, 2017) and has published articles in the *Journal of American History*, *American Quarterly*, and the *Journal of American Ethnic History*. His scholarship has earned multiple distinctions, including book awards from the Immigration and Ethnic History Society, the New England American Studies



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Feedback

Association, and the American Conference for Irish Studies, as well as the Paul L. Murphy Award, the Cromwell Dissertation Prize, and the Cromwell Fellowship from the American Society for Legal History.

Professor Hirota's major works have appeared in the *Journal of American History*, *American Quarterly*, and the *Journal of American Ethnic History*. His published articles received best essay awards from the Organization of American Historians, the Immigration and Ethnic History Society, and the Society for History in the Federal Government. Professor Hirota, and his work, has been featured by [CUNY Radio](#), [C-SPAN](#), [The Atlantic](#), [TIME](#), and [The Irish Times](#).

Professor Hirota is currently working on two book projects. One of them, *The Business of the Nation*, examines the significance of foreign contract labor in American immigration history, demonstrating how concerns about contract laborers from Asia, Europe, and Mexico transformed immigration control from a regional affair for coastal states to an issue of national-level significance in the United States. He is also developing another book, *Democratic Intolerance*, which provides a synthetic history of American nativism from the American Revolution to the present.

Feedback